

OP-EDS

ABORTION: OUT OF THE POLITICAL TRAP

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Quote from the first issue of Alexander Berkman's *The Blast*. Photo by Carolmooredc. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Whether or not *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, it will be headed the way of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Supreme Court decision establishing a broad decriminalization of abortion throughout the United States has been unusually resilient for such a contentious subject. For nearly half a century, the verdict seemed as settled as any could be in American politics, with those favoring greater restrictions content to limit access *de facto*, rather than risk pushback against drastic changes to what is allowed *de jure*.

Yet the legal status of such a controversial topic remaining stable for such a period of time was the exception, not the rule. Beneath the long detente lay decades “of compromising, and dickering, and trying to keep what was as it was, and to hand sops to both sides when new conditions demanded that something be done, or be pretended to be done” — words **written** more than half a century before *Roe*, about the issue of slavery.

Essayist Voltairine de Cleyre noted that political compromise set the stage for clashes between opposing camps, regardless of what the laws were on paper. Abolitionists pressed not only against slave own-

ers, but those who thought that slavery “was probably a mistake” but “were in no great ferment of anxiety to have it abolished.”

It’s particularly ironic that advocates of family planning have forgotten de Cleyre’s reminder of how things can get done by individuals or groups in voluntary association “without going to external authorities to please do the thing for them.”

Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger got the idea from de Cleyre’s anarchist comrade Emma Goldman. Yet as Goldman biographer Richard Drinnon observed, Sanger “guided the movement into respectably conservative channels by emphasizing the need for legislation which would give doctors, and doctors only, the right to impart contraceptive information.”

Sanger had joined with de Cleyre and Goldman not only in promoting personal autonomy for women, but for children between birth and adulthood in Modern Schools. Yet Sanger ceded to the state the very power over reproductive health she had wrested from private patriarchs, [viewing](#) “the personal liberty of the individual” in that realm as “unrestricted and irresponsible.” Her successors have insisted that organizations like Planned Parenthood can only function with government subsidies — while minimizing the fraction of funds going directly to abortion!

Once again, as de Cleyre put it, “the direct actionists on both sides” will “fight it out” in contested territory, which this time spans the entire country. The collapse of consensus will unleash plenty of acrimony, but “pro-choice” and “pro-life” partisans may as well drop the pretense that the government is either.

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PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY

1. [“Abortion: Out Of The Political Trap”](#) by Joel Schlosberg, Ventura County, California *Citizens Journal*, May 9, 2022
2. [“Abortion: Out of the Political Trap”](#) by Joel Schlosberg, CounterPunch, May 10, 2022
3. [“Abortion: Out of the political trap”](#) by Joel Schlosberg, Miles City, Montana *Star*, May 10, 2022
4. [“Abortion: Out of the political trap”](#) by Joel Schlosberg, Creston, Iowa *News Advertiser*, May 11, 2022